

# Valuing co-workers and the dignity of labor

By Bishop Paul V. Marshall

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*This is Bishop Paul Marshall's September column for secular newspapers, usually different from his column in Diocesan Life. The column is sent to newspapers throughout our 14 counties. It is published by The Morning Call, Allentown, on the first (occasionally, the second) Saturday of every month. The combined circulation of papers that publish the column regularly is about 400,000. More than 110 columns have been published over the past ten years.*

When my wife was a nurse in New York, one of her pleasures in working at Roosevelt Hospital was the energetic volunteer who came several times a week to push the book cart. It was Ethel Merman. She never made a big deal about it, and people quickly accepted her as a co-worker.

Co-worker. Someone who is considered a contributing member of a team.

Not everybody gets that status, unfortunately. Do you help in a hospital? Do you care for your grandchildren while your adult child works? Do you cook and clean and launder and deal with the plumber? Do you mow the lawn and clean the roof and vacuum the car?

Do you know that it doesn't count?

An economist-neighbor wrote me earlier this summer that normally, when members of her trade count up the "product" of a country, only the efforts that generate money count.

She said things are slowly changing in some parts of her academic area. I cannot speak about economics as a theory or profession, but something in what she said has questions for how each of us looks at life this Labor Day.

Labor Day sprang from the efforts of the Knights of Labor to have the dignity of labor recognized. A century before, a key element in the definition of “lady” or “gentlemen” was someone who did not work.

A lot of change had to occur before the Labor Day concept was even possible. Harvard historian Steward Wood claims that America was the first place someone could work and still be considered at all a lady or gentleman.

There are cultural historians who now, instead of scoffing at the “Protestant Work Ethic,” realize that it contributed to the development of American democracy by moving the highest moral status from those who do not have to work to those who are actually productive of goods, services, government, or ideas.

A first goal for Labor Day reflection might be to widen our perspective on productivity, on identified co-workers in creating America’s life. Whose work, paid or otherwise, makes our lives at home and in the larger community possible, even pleasant?

Sometime during summer’s last holiday, it might be useful to reflect on how much other people make any valuable aspect of life possible. Many people are clever and energetic, but nobody is self-made. We all depend on the work, paid or not, of many other people.

Several prayers in my own tradition speak of “the dignity of human labor.” Respecting that dignity means acknowledging the value of all who work, volunteered or paid. We see the creator’s intent in the need for meaningful use of one’s energy. It is part of human identity and needs to be valued.

But valuing even the paid work of others may be out of fashion again. The New York Times (8/28) reports that wages have been the smallest percentage of the gross domestic product since 1947, and that employee benefits have leveled or decreased. Corporate profits have taken up the largest percentage of the GNP since the 1960s. The insult is compounded: American workers are more productive than ever, and

reaping less for their efforts.

The Times' economists reflect on why this situation is bad for the economy. They report also that politicians are worried. That's not my field, so on Labor Day I offer a second subject for reflection: is it at all possible for the dignity of labor to be recognized voluntarily – or is anybody thinking about the issues I am recalling here? We really do need all of our co-workers, paid and unpaid, and it is best if we act accordingly.

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